

EQUALIZING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN NIGERIAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

The issue of equalizing educational opportunities is a vexed one worldwide. It is even more serious now with the global economic belt-tightening which has many implications for educational practice. This study examined the various dimensions of providing educational service to all citizens on equal basis. First it identified the prevailing inequalities, pointing out the respective implications of such inequalities. Then the factors which militate against Nigeria's declared equalitarian objectives are identified as social, geopolitical, economic and religious. It was recommended among others solutions that very radical reforms in our educational practices in order to ensure equal educational opportunity for all Nigerians in the 21st century.

INTRODUCTION

Equal educational opportunities are one of the contemporary controversies which have kept both philosophers and sociologists of education very busy in their search for solutions to some of the crises in education. Ordinarily, the desire for equal educational opportunity for all citizens is a very laudable one which should be acclaimed by all those who are concerned with national development. Fifty one years after independence is long enough for a country to sit back and assess its developmental strides. It becomes necessary therefore to look at the educational services as provided for in its developmental programmes whether it will be possible to provide it equitably in the 21st century to all Nigerians irrespective of tribe, class, religion, gender or geographic differences.

EQUALITY

Peters (1974) declares that the empirical generalization that "all men are equal" like the term "same" is generally used for comparing people or things only in some respects. For example, with respect to height, weight, intelligence, complexion, human beings are manifestly not equal and these have formed the basis for many psychological principles which educationists have adopted for several years in their educational practice. Even in our everyday experience, inequalities stare us in the face very glaringly. Also, as Aristotle pointed out, the principle of distributive justice is the mundane notion that distinctions should be made if there are relevant differences and that they should not be made if there are no relevant differences, or on the basis of irrelevant difference. Equalitarianisms have often run into problem in their attempts to implement the equality principle. For example, material things can be easily distributed both unequally and equally with certain pre-determined rules for

distribution. But education is a lot different from such common-place things that can be easily distributed among people discretely. How, for example do you equalize educational opportunity for the brilliant child and the confirmed imbecile? How do you equalize educational opportunity for the physiologically normal child and the patently disabled one? Even on a wider scale, how do you equalize educational opportunity for a very bright, progressive and forward looking society and a patently backward, inward looking and culturally deprived one? These are issues which border on our interpretations of the concept of equality.

Equal educational opportunity may operationally be explained to mean equal access or the means to formal education. This equality is regardless of differences in location, sex, social standing, ethnicity and even religion. The marked differences which actually confront us in our daily lives and in all spheres really cause us some discomfort when we talk about equal this or that. It is often pointed that although everyone has equality before the law, courts do not discriminate against anyone on irrelevant grounds. In fact, we know that the affluent members of society generally have easier access to first class, legal luminaries who generally have a way of influencing the course of justice in their favour as against a poor man who cannot afford the service of a brilliant attorney at law. In this instance, how do you equalize justice for these entirely different individuals?

It is obvious therefore that if equality was all that was valued in a society, there would be almost no limit to the demand for such frivolous egalitarian extensions. Arrangements would therefore have to be made to remove such obvious inequalities as family background, social standing, wealth, and the type of school, sex and a host of other individual differences. In short, we might find that such arrangements infringe recklessly on individual liberties and freedom almost to a point of ridicule (Ezewu, 1994). The concept of equality as it applies in other facets of human endeavour may not be practicable in education particularly with respect to its distribution and the intrinsic value which individuals and societies attach to it. Again our individual interpretations and understanding of education and its role in society go a long way in creating bottlenecks for its equalization.

Equality and Education in Nigeria

The history of early western education in Nigeria dates back to the days of early missionary activities. The activities of these missionaries were concentrated along the Atlantic coastal towns of Nigeria with a very gradual process of incursions in to the hinterlands (Kosemani, 1998; Okobiah, 2002). This was the genesis of the geographic inequalities which has eaten deep into our educational system in Nigeria. Even where the early missionaries made efforts to break through the lines of inequalities, their efforts were stoutly resisted by those who placed little or no value on the process and products of western education. There were serious misgivings concerning the worth of western education particularly in the Muslim north where the Islamic culture and education had strongholds. So while the north was advancing with its Islamic education, the southern part of Nigeria was making tremendous

progress in western education (Fafunwa, 1991). Looking at education whether western or eastern, as a process of initiation and socialization into what a community considers to be worthwhile, it becomes clear that it is almost impossible to bring about worthwhile products by methods which are morally neutral, Peters, (1974).

Being educated for example marks a group of achievements which are internally related to present or distribute on equal basis. Bowles (1968), Bowles and Gintis (1976) also agreed that equality, whether in wages, taxation, voting rights, justice and above all, education is not easily attainable in modern societies because of the high degree of stratification particularly in modern capitalist societies. In accepting stratification as necessary and desirable however, a modern day government normally tries to ensure its citizens' equal opportunity for upward mobility - an equal chance which ultimately leads to further inequalities because the means for competition are not equally distributed (Haralambos and Holborn, 1994).

The Nigerian government has declared in its 1981 National Policy Education its resolve to provide education to all its citizens as a means of an equalitarian end. In other words every Nigerian is expected to enjoy some educational service up to a certain level. The implication is that Nigeria has accepted education as a means to the realization of equality objective. The widespread schooling provision which accompanied the Obafemi Awolowo Action Group government of the Western Region of Nigeria in 1955 was a turning point in the equalitarian role of education in Nigeria. Through the Universal Free Primary Education (UFPE) in the then Western Region a large percentage of the population had the opportunity for education and general enlightenment programmes. A large number of people in the process became qualified for participation in the overall governance and this further enabled the appropriate authorities to instill the necessary equalitarian ethnics in the younger generation through civic courses and other socializing mass oriented programmes.

School itself has also been identified as one of the main agents of stratification in modern societies (Illich, 1971). It therefore follows that the amount of schooling available to the average citizen, and the degree to which recruitment to specialized positions is based on academic achievement will determine in large measure the extent to which equality in education is actually realized in that society (Dore, 1978). The situation in Nigeria which makes the call for equal educational opportunity for all Nigerians in the 21st century very critical is very clear:

- (i) Nigeria is a very heterogeneous country with well over two hundred indigenous ethnic languages. One of the places where some direction could be given to the linguistic chaos is the school system; hence the English language still predominates in schools in spite of the provisions for indigenous languages in schools, especially for instruction.
- (ii) The Nigerian government and its economy are so bureaucratized that the only means of entry is through a high performance in some competitive public examinations like the civil service examination. It is also the school system only that can ensure some equalitarianism in selection and recruitment.

- (iii) The Nigerian government's determination to develop and modernize cannot be achieved except through some high level scientific and technical skills, which can be acquired through some institutional training programme like the ones generally offered through the conventional school system.

At the primary level for example, Bowles and Gintis (1976) argued that education should be available to an entire age-group regardless of parents' ability to pay school fees, and regardless of a child's sex, religion and even intellectual ability. This argument removes almost all obstacles to equalitarianism. Thus the more school places there are the more equalitably the different categories of the population are represented in the classrooms, and the lower the schools fees the more equalitarian the primary school system tends to be. Experience has shown however, that the lower the school fees are in most school systems the lower the quality of the resulting education except perhaps in the Unity Schools where the federal governments' generous subsidy allows school fees to be relatively low and yet the quality is high.

Faure (1982) however considers all equalitarian efforts by emerging nations, most especially the third world countries, as a waste because inequalities are an integral part of our human existence. Specifically, he argues that it is a futility to attempt to multiply the opportunities for access to schooling as advocated for by Bowles and Gintis (1976), because it does not necessarily increase equality of opportunity. Experience has shown that the level of criteria for success generally moves steadily higher as soon as more opportunities are created in whatever form. The result is that it is always just beyond the masses and in the process further widening the inequality gap. Trow (1966) and Karabel (1972) had noted that each expansion of educational access has always been accompanied by a corresponding educational differentiation which required entirely different educational programmes for different students - a complete negation of the equality objective.

A classical example is the establishment of the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) which was meant to serve an equalitarian purpose of leveling the opportunity for entry into Nigeria Universities - through its University Matriculation Examination (UME) system. But the caveats of the UME have long been evident in the widespread poor performance of the candidates from year to year (Okebukola, 2002). It is common knowledge that candidates had to have attended high brow, good quality secondary schools or some special and privately funded preparatory coaching classes in order to be able to pass the University Matriculation Examination (UME). Unequal abilities and other inequalities have made it almost impossible for the JAMB to level the chances.

In fact this is further accentuated by the action of each university which, in order to discriminate between the good and the bad candidates, arbitrarily raises the cut-off mark to a level that is generally far above the ability of most candidates. And only recently, a new filtering process - the Post University Matriculation Examination (P-UME) was introduced to further de-equalize the entry opportunities for all university degree seekers. The various schools of basic studies and the individual

universities' pre-degree programmes may well be very germane to the equal educational objectives. From the foregoing, it is clear that stratification in all ramifications - along income, educational and status lines appears to be an inevitable part of modernization in any modern society - but the gap between the haves and have-nots tends to be especially pronounced where a handful privileged people enjoy unlimited affluence while the mass of the population remains at subsistence or near subsistence level. This does not augur well for the healthy development of any society; rather, it portends a very volatile situation. Like the phenomenon of armed militancy or kidnapping which have kept the law enforcement agencies on their toes in the last decade.

OBSTACLES TO EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is evidently a capitalist state and in most capitalist nations, children from middle and upper class homes have built-in advantages for securing access to the best of schools. For example, almost all the universities in Nigeria have special schools both primary and secondary which are by far different from the public schools in the same towns which the universities are located. Even the military have their own special command schools located right within their barracks for their children. In addition, the Corona schools, the Unity schools and a long array of other privately owned schools are dominated by children of the rich upper class parents, academicians, top flight military personnel and the top echelon of the state and federal civil service. This arrangement simply ignores the equal educational opportunity arrangement. It is a kind of survival of the fittest where the equalitarian objective appears to have been jettisoned.

It is commonly said that knowledge is power, and so, the children of those who possess power have been blessed with the easiest access to knowledge and thus to future power and ultimately the best in life. Equal education has also been seriously hampered by differences which have resulted in the area of location, gender, socio-economic, cultural ethnic origins and social status.

Location Factor: Children in urban centres have generally been known to have better access to better schooling than rural children of even equivalent intelligent quotient (IQ). In several parts of the developed world, the situation is however reversing. The inner city centres of most urban sprawls are being deserted by the upper and middle class citizens with their families. The better schools and facilities are also shifting to the suburbs. In developing countries however, only very few good schools are located in the rural areas. In fact, the general neglect of the rural areas prevents teachers from accepting posting to rural areas (Musa, 1988). Even budgetary allocations aggravate these disparities because the schools in the urban centres are close to the seats of government whose funds get to much easier. In the words of Coombs (1985), the prevailing dual urban/rural education system in low

income countries deprives a large majority of rural youngsters of even a full primary education, let alone a chance at a secondary or higher education. It is mainly the children of the poorest families in the rural areas and urban slums who account for the astronomically high figures of non-school goers and early drop-outs.

Gender Factor: For various cultural reasons, equal educational opportunity has been hampered by differences in sex. The discrimination which women have had to experience stems from a deep seated cultural attitude toward women. The role of women in Nigeria and in fact Africa as a whole is intimately linked to their reproductive function. Traditionally, the woman is expected to marry early, procreate and rear as many children as "God gives" her. Girls are traditionally socialized early in their lives into the key roles of mother, house keeper and so on. Over 80 percent of all African women live in the rural areas under the condition that are inimical to good and equal education. Particularly, all activities, including education which conflict with child rearing and early marriage are deliberately discouraged. This ultimately limits their access to good employment opportunities, health facilities and education. Since the 1980s however, there has been a tremendous and steady growth in the percentage of women enrolment in almost all levels of education.

Socio-Economic Factor: One of the most serious obstacles to equal educational opportunity is the socio-economic factor which generally manifests itself in income/wealth, racial, ethnic and occupational differentials. Coombs (1985) reports that in virtually all nations today, including Nigeria, children of parents who are high in the educational, occupational and social scales have a far better statistical chance of attending good secondary schools, the best colleges and even the 'best' universities than equally brilliant children of low income workers, illiterates, peasants and other rural dwellers. In fact children of the latter group are always over represented in the poorer public schools like the commercial, vocational and all the other ill-equipped schools which go by all manner of names. The initial advantage enjoyed by children of some educated parents through nursery education, tends to broaden with each successive school year and level of schooling. The private primary and secondary schools are the main breeding grounds for the striking inequalities that manifest themselves in the universities where able and motivated children whose parents can afford to enroll them have been guaranteed admission places. The less fortunate children of the lesser mortals must make do with the dregs, the less prestigious, all-comers and in most cases often lower quality public schools.

STRATEGIES FOR EQUALIZING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Even though real evidence of inequalities stare us in the face everywhere in Nigeria, only a little is known quantitatively. There is the need to be definite about the figures of the actual number of schools in the rural areas vis-à-vis the urban centres. This

will guide the appropriate authorities in making provisions for facilities. Reliable hard data is difficult to find to guide good planning towards equitable distribution of men and materials. Areas which have been designated educationally disadvantaged will have to receive more attention from the three tiers of government.

More effort is also required in the present campaign by the UN in its Education for All (EFA) programme and in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). Emphasis should now shift specially to education for rural women - both old and young through some special provision of incentive to the teachers who will be deployed to the rural areas. Radical reforms in education financing are also called for. These could be through generous scholarship programmes for all. Nursery education should be encouraged. So far, there is no evidence of direct government involvement in pre-primary education. The effects of the various continuing education centres, adult education programmes, and migrant education for both cattlemen and fishermen should be complemented by government and well meaning individuals. All kinds of powerful interest groups which presently exercise some covert control over the implementation of our educational programmes should be broken.

Due to their paranoid fear of the effects of equal education on the status quo, they have very subtle ways of controlling the machinery for its implementation. This should be broken. Finally, there is an urgent need for a liberalization of government machinery for enforcing education laws and financing. The spate of industrial actions currently going on the growth of education should give serious concern to government and all educators. Education is definitely an essential service, requiring special attention by way of funding, provision of men and materials and general management. Nigeria will need to reorder her priorities and divest her financial resources from Governance, Defence, Abuja and other white elephant projects and debt servicing to the over all development of education.

CONCLUSION

It has been pointed out that the inequalities which have been identified are an integral part of existential life. The extent to which to expect equal distribution of the various elements of education has also been pointed out. Knowing how slow the process of change in education and in human beings normally is, may be, what Nigeria would need to do is to double present efforts. Otherwise, education for all Nigerians by the 21st century may just be a mirage.

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